7-1906

Corneille: The Neo-Classic Tragedy and the Greek

Prosser Hall Frye

VOL. VI JULY 1906 No. 3

UNIVERSITY STUDIES

Published by the University of Nebraska

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LINCOLN NEBRASKA

Entered at the post-office in Lincoln, Nebraska, as second-class matter, as University Bulletin, Series XI, No. 18

III.—*Corneille: The Neo-Classic Tragedy and the Greek*[1]

BY PROSSER HALL FRYE

I

It is not solely the fault of our critics that we have no such criticism as the French; it is also the fault of our literature. To write a history of English literature like M. Lanson's history of French literature is, even on that small scale, impossible from the nature of the subject. To be sure, there is no such general interest in the former as in the latter. The historian or the critic who undertakes French letters finds an opinion already formed, a canon already established. His meal is at least partly ground for him; he has only to make his dough. But this is not all the difference. English literature, unlike the French, does not constitute a coherent body of thought, a consistent "criticism of life," with a fairly continuous growth or evolution; and a similar treatment of it, as a branch of intellectual development, is therefore out of the question. In fact, our literature is not so largely an affair of definition; not only is it poorer in ideas, it is also patterned less closely in accordance with theory. In all English there is no example of the *genre tranché*, such as Sainte-Beuve loved; hardly of a conscious school or formula, or even of a preconceived purpose. It is individual, capricious, empiric, indiscriminate.

[1] Corneille, *Théatre;* Racine, *Théatre;* Voltaire, *Oedipe, Brutus, Zaire, la Mort de César, Alzire, Mahomet, Mérope, l'Orphelin de la Chine, Tancréde, les Scythes, les Guèbres;* Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth;* Johnson, *Sejanus, Cataline;* Dryden, *The Conquest of Granada, Don Sebastian, All for Love;* Goethe, *Iphigenia auf Tauris;* Schiller, *Die Braut von Messina;* Aeschylus, *Prometheus Vinctus,* the *Oresteia;* Sophocles, *Tragoediae;* Euripides, *Hippolytus, Iphigenia at Aulis* and *at Tauris, Medea, Electra, Orestes, Hecuba,* the *Bacchae;* Seneca, *Tragoediae.*

UNIVERSITY STUDIES, Vol VI, No. 3, July 1906.

The writer himself seems hardly conscious of his own inclination, but follows instinctively the line of least resistance. Not only is the Shakespearean comedy utterly promiscuous, compounded of many simples, a thing without prescription; it is also more or less a thing apart, without a history, itself a "sport" like the genius which produced it. To the student of English, for whom such work has become standard, it is something of a surprise to read Corneille with Voltaire's commentary at hand and observe the nicety with which the critic pretends to discriminate among his author's ingredients, not merely as they are good or bad, but as they are agreeable or otherwise with the literary type before him. It is a revelation of the comparative precision and purity of the ideas in accordance with which French literature was, and in spite of the confusions of the *romanticists* still is, to some extent, written and judged.

But at the same time, definite as are the lines on which French literature moves, the symmetry of the French classic at all events and of the classic French drama in particular, is likely to appear rather rigid and formal to the student of English. And yet there is one side by which Corneille and even Racine may appeal to him. With an instinct of definiteness and regularity which is peculiarly French, their work combines singularly enough something of that promiscuity, of that anomalousness which he is used to in English, though with a difference. For it is not the mere adaptation of a foreign or an ancient model which is characteristic of that particular literature. Indeed, if it were nothing else than an imitation of the pure classic, like Milton's *Samson Agonistes,* the neo-classic drama would be of comparatively little interest. As a matter of fact, however, it was an attempt to interpret one life in terms evolved by another. Naturally the new wine tended to dilate, even to disrupt, the old bottles, while conforming to their general outline. But since a literary form is not merely a vehicle of thought but an outgrowth of it, the attempt, such as it was in other respects, necessarily involved, in their application to new uses, a criticism of the terms themselves and of the ancient ideas implicit in them. And it is this fusion, or rather this collision of two cultures in the one set of expressions, with all its complicated

discrepancies and contradictions, which constitutes the peculiarity of the neo-classic tragedy. In fact, so peculiar is it that the reader who approaches it from the side of an integral tradition, however heterogeneous the latter may be, hardly knows what to make of it at first, and will never, the chances are, acquire a genuine taste for it.

While in Racine's case it is the product as a whole which the foreigner finds disconcerting, yet in Corneille's the feeling of individual incongruities is perhaps the more noticeable. To the English reader in particular, if I am successful in recalling an original impression, Corneille presents at first sight a sufficiently curious spectacle. As a great spontaneous genius—for such, however outlandish to us in manner, he certainly was—capable both of the happiest turns and the flattest lapses, he finds his nearest English counterpart in Shakespeare, though in the ethic appreciation of character and in the phantasmagoric sense of life he was so far inferior. For this reason it is unsafe to judge Corneille before one has taken his range. He is not a poet to be measured by any one piece, even by that perfectly unique masterpiece of irony and statescraft, *Nicomède;* for he never succeeded in attaining a level and keeping it. There are always times when his hand is out. He has his ups and downs at every period, in nearly every play. His development is not rectilinear and continuous, but radial and spasmodic. And it is necessary, in order to know him, not merely to establish the *loci* of his career chronologically, but also to ascertain his high-water marks and plot his curve from one to another—the intrigue of *le Menteur,* the rhetoric of *Pompée,* the romance of *le Cid,* and so on. In some such manner alone one comes to understand the elevation to which his spirit rose from time to time. And though it ebbs as often as it touches such an extreme, yet, together with a sense of the instability of his genius, one gains also a sense of its variety and compass, for it recedes merely to flow again in some new direction.

As a bold and vigorous temperament, on the other hand, a Norman, with a taste for the romantic and sensational, for intrigue and adventure, but constrained and embarrassed by the timidity of a conventional and imitative society and age, he ap-

proaches most nearly to Dryden, though he lacked the latter's easy adaptability and his thoroughly English common sense and humor. But for all that there are about the author of *Tyrannick Love* a stiffness, not so much of temper as of craft, an awkwardness, and also an imperturbable solemnity in the pursuit of the tragic which are very like the author of *Polyeucte*. Indeed, Dryden is probably, of all English dramatists, the one who resembles Corneille most, whether because he deliberately formed himself upon his illustrious contemporary or was naturally of a kindred spirit. At times when Dryden is at his best, his note is almost identical with certain of Corneille's.

"Que tout meure avec moi, madame: que m'importe
Qui foule après ma mort la terre qui me porte?
Sentiront-ils percer par un éclat nouveau,
Ces illustres aïeux, la nuit de leur tombeau?
Respireront-ils l'air où les feront revivre
Ces neveux qui peut-être auront peine à les suivre,
Peut-être ne feront que les déshonorer,
Et n'en auront le sang que pour dégénérer?
Quand nous avons perdu le jour qui nous éclaire,
Cette sorte de vie est bien imaginaire,
Et le moindre moment d'un bonheur souhaité
Vaut mieux qu'une si froide et vaine éternité."
—*Surena, I, 3.*

"How vain is virtue, which directs our ways
Through certain danger to uncertain praise!
Barren and airy name! thee Fortune flies,
With her lean train, the pious and the wise.
Heaven takes thee at thy word, without regard,
And lets thee poorly be thy own reward.
The world is made for the bold impious man,
Who stops at nothing, seizes all he can.
Justice to merit does weak aid afford;
She trusts her balance and neglects her sword.
Virtue is nice to take what's not her own;
And while she long consults the prize is gone."
—*Aureng-Zebe, II, 1.*

"La vie est peu de chose; et tôt ou tard qu'importe
Qu'un traître me l'arrache, ou que l'âge l'importe?
Nous mourons à toute heure; et dans le plus doux sort
Chaque instant de la vie est un pas vers la mort."
—*Tite et Berenice, V, 1.*

Decidedly Corneille is the greater playwright. But it is impossible in his case as in Dryden's to overlook this significant sense of constraint, because it is a critical symptom of the *genre* as it was in that age. There are writers more artificial than Dryden and Corneille; but there are few, if any, who produce, with so strong an impression of power, the same peculiar effect of *gêne.* Racine is more artificial and conventional; but Racine has learned to move smoothly and elegantly within the bounds prescribed him. He is, to all appearance, happily unconscious of interference or obstruction. But in Corneille's case it is not so much that he is hindered in the satisfaction of his desires as that he is not quite sure what he wants himself—or ought to want. For this state of mind the *Examens* are conclusive. It is sufficient to quote from that of *Rodogune.*

"On m'a souvent fait une question à la Cour, quel étoit celuy de mes poëmes que j'estimois le plus, et j'ay trouvé tous ceux qui me l'ont faite si prévenus en faveur de *Cinna* ou du *Cid* que je n'ay jamais osé declarer toute la tendresse que j'ay toûjours euë pour celuy-cy, à qui j'aurois volontiers donné ma suffrage, si je n'avois craint de manquer en quelque sorte au respect que je devois à ceux que je voyois pancher d'un autre costé. Cette préférence est peut-estre en moy un effet de ces inclinations aveugles qu'ont beaucoup de péres pour quelques-uns de leurs enfans plus que pour les autres; peut-estre y entre-t-il un peu d'amour propre, en ce que cette tragédie me semble estre un peu plus à moy que celles qui l'ont précédée, à cause des incidens surprenans qui sont purement de mon invention, et n'avoient jamais été veus au theâtre; et peut-estre enfin y a-t-il un peu de vray mérite, qui fait que cette inclination n'est pas tout-à-fait injuste."

It is instructive to compare this tentative judgment with Lessing's, who was an inveterate classicist after his kind and knew precisely what he was after.

"Denn wozu alle diese Erdichtungen? Machen sie in der Geschichte, die er damit überladet, das geringste wahrscheinlicher? Sie sind nicht einmal für sich selbst wahrscheinlich. Corneille prahlte damit als mit sehr wunderbaren Anstrengungen der Erdichtungskraft; und er hätte doch wohl wissen sollen, dass nicht das blosse Erdichten, sondern das zweckmässige Erdichten einen schöpfrischen Geist beweise."[1]

[1] Lessing. *Hamburgische Dramaturgie,* xxxii. The entire criticism extends from nos. xxix–xxxii.

But it is only fair to remark, too, that his criticism, excellent as it is in method, as well as the usual present day estimate, rests upon a misconception in assuming Cléopatre as the personage of the piece by whom it necessarily stands or falls. For the mistake there is the more excuse because Corneille himself speaks to the same effect. And yet it seems obvious enough that the interest does not center in Cléopatre at all, but in Antiochus. Antiochus, not Cléopatre, is the genuinely Corneillean character. And the recognition of this fact requires some readjustment of criticism.

By the time Corneille had made *Nicomède* he had, to be sure, developed a kind of formula; his succeeding plays do follow essentially the same receipt. But it is in reality nothing more than a procédé, not a theorem, and it does not always work. All his life he remained virtually divided between impulse and authority, unable to choose definitely, but anxious to effect a reconciliation, between the old and the new, the medieval and the antique—to *accorder les règles anciennes avec les agrémens modernes* in his own words—in short, between those two conceptions of literature and life which were brought into such violent confrontation by the renaissance and which have since come to be distinguished, rather vaguely though conveniently, as romantic and classic. Hence the curiously experimental character peculiar to his drama, which is, in fact, a compromise among the rival claimants to his regard and is consequently full of contradictions and inconsistencies.

II

To define broadly the difference between these two views of literature,[1] it may be said, in very general terms, that the modern or romantic manner has made itself remarkable mainly for its research of actuality. The thrill and tingle of sensation, the smart of experience, the distraction of accident and circumstance,

[1] Aristotle, *Poetics;* Corneille, *Discours;* Dryden, *Essay of Dramatic Poesy, Defense of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy, Of Heroic Plays, Defense of the Epilogue to the Second Part of the Conquest of Granada;* Boileau, *l'Art poétique;* Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie;* Schiller, *Ueber naive und sentimentalische Dichtung;* A. W. Schlegel, *Vorlesungen ueber dramatische Kunst und Litteratur;* Hegel, *Aesthetik;* Freytag, *Technik des Dramas;* Stapfer, *Shakespeare et les tragiques Grecs.*

the harsh and stinging contact of things material, these are the effects it chiefly admires and imitates. The sole literary development of any importance since the Greeks has consisted almost wholly in devices for the more accurate registration of fact, whether of character or incident, until the kaleidoscopic spectacle of nature and the particolored phantasmagoria of human life have come to constitute for modern literature and art the only serious concern. To the Greek tragedian, on the contrary, art was the sole reality, not life; life itself was merely phantasmal, a vain and misleading appearance.

> Ὁρῶ γὰρ, ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν ὄντας ἄλλο πλὴν
> εἴδωλ', ὅσοιπερ ζῶμεν, ἢ κούφην σκιάν.
>
> —*Ajax,* 125–26.

That it was infinitely poignant, infinitely suggestive, he saw; but he saw also that it was infinitely prolix, irrelevant, and disconcerting, and that its poignancy, no less than its suggestiveness, was the result, not of its significance, but of its indefiniteness. On the whole such a vision, by its very confusion and uncertainty, afflicted him, like a nightmare, with the nameless moral horror which still lurks upon the confines of the *Prometheus Bound*—the horror of a man who has just made good his escape from a world of chaos and unreason. To his mind it was in no way desirable that a poem should be *suggestive,* that it should produce a vague and tantalizing sense of illimitable possibility, but rather that it should be *expressive*—that it should contain, not so much an exact reproduction of experience and of the emotions proper to it, as some principle for its intelligible ordering and interpretation. In short, the main affair was the general idea after which the play was cast. And it is for this reason that Greek tragedy always produces a profound conviction of design. It is not a free observation or impression of life, as we say nowadays, giving rise to any number of inferences and suggestions. It is an arrangement, an adaptation, set, not to catch an exact image of reality, but to mirror the author's thought. It does not disturb or trouble or distract by the flicker of its surface reflection or the opacity of its intention, like *King Lear;* it settles and confirms

and tranquillizes, like the *Oedipus.* And finally it displaces every other possible interpretation, informing the consciousness with its own image and idea to the exclusion of all others. It is whole and single and complete, a closed system which neither admits nor raises conjecture—at once a cosmos and a revelation.

Even if the Greek had had the pretension to make his drama a *pastiche* of life, as we do ours, it is doubtful whether he could ever have succeeded in doing so on account of its peculiar construction. The chorus alone would have been enough to destroy the acute sense of actuality. To say nothing at present of the temporal and spatial restrictions which it imposed upon the action and which were enough in themselves to divide it from existence and give it an air of intelligent fabrication—even then, if a bit of real life could have been exposed there in the Greek orchestra, it would not have looked real with the chorus between it and the spectators. The chorus itself might be conceived as looking at life directly; but in no case could the audience, viewing it through the chorus, be conceived as getting it otherwise than as refracted by the medium through which it passed, like the report of a bystander. And such, in all probability, as De Quincey ingeniously suggests,[1] was in effect its artistic force. It framed off the representation, setting it apart, if not altogether insulating it, from actual existence, reenforcing its idealistic character and at the same time rationalizing what we are prone to consider its artificiality. For whether the chorus were technically spectator or actor, it is clear enough in any case that Greek tragedy is, by its very interposition, separated from experience by at least one more remove than modern tragedy; and represents, therefore, an additional mental distillation or rectification of fact.

Of course it would be absurd to say that modern literature engages in its productions no ultimate significance at all. If it did not—if it merely imposed upon the phenomena of experience the more or less arbitrary form of some *genre,* as naturalism tries to

[1] De Quincey. *The Theory of Greek Tragedy.* cf. Brunetière, *L'Evolution du'n genre, Études critiques sur l'histoire de la literature française,* vii. "Nous n'avons plus sous les yeaux les événements eux-memes, mais le reflet des événements dans l'imagination du poète."

do, it would, like naturalism, be hardly felt as literature at all. In a comparison of Shakespeare's four tragedies, *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear,* and *Macbeth,* it is curious to observe that the last is dramatically superior to the others, and is at the same time the clearest, the most intelligible in design, and reveals most distinctly the presence of a controlling purpose, the imprint of a definite idea. There is little or no more difficulty about the meaning of *Macbeth* as a whole than about that of the *Ajax*—a circumstance, perhaps, which gives it its deceptive air of similarity to the Greek. On the contrary, *King Lear,* which is the least subservient to such control—for how can any vital congruity be established between the last act and the acts preceding?—is dramatically the least effective and produces what effect it does produce, like life itself, scatteringly and piecemeal, with a final sense of mystification, bewilderment, and agitation. For it must be constantly remembered, in judging of these matters, that a piece which requires for its significance the perception of some wider principle of order than the piece itself declares, is precisely a fragment of life, not a work of art. And it is vicious criticism, for instance, to say of *King Lear* that it is not in itself inconsistent with the Christian conception of a beneficent overruling Providence or to refer to its unreason as a case carried up to some higher court for revision.[1] A play is significant in itself or not at all. To Sophocles any mere concatenation of circumstances, such as composes *King Lear,* no matter how close the mechanical articulation or the causal connection, would not constitute a drama unless it yielded a consistent idea.

It is not, then, that romantic literature is entirely lacking in that purposefulness which discerns a leading idea amid the ferment of existence and organizes its material accordingly; it is rather that in modern literature such ideas have come to play a part subordinate to the registration of discrete impressions. And yet this is not the whole story either. Not only has the influence of ideas decreased, their character has also changed. A literature

[1] Compare A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy,* Lect. VIII. This, moreover, is a fallacy which tends to vitiate Freytag's treatment of the tragic.

will always reflect the sense of its makers. If they are concerned mainly with their kind, and with the world which they inhabit only as the theater of human action, then will their interpretation, as well as their vision of life be in the main a moral one. But on the other hand, if they are interested in the universe chiefly for its own sake, as a curious spectacle in which man figures like any other object only that he is locomotory, then will every fact have a value in and for itself irrespective of any ultimate significance; while those who consider curiously will find, no doubt, the meaning of the whole to consist in some idea or expression or formula about the relation of these various parts which appear in themselves so very interesting and important. And their exposition of life, like their conception of it, will be mainly materialistic or, in modern language, scientific. Now some such change as this it is which has, to all appearance, taken place. Whereas the Greek had little or no mechanical sense of fact, the modern has been more and more inclining, in accordance with the latter view, to consider nature itself as of superlative importance, and consciousness as but a small and even subordinate part of it. Hence that growing curiosity about things as things and that supreme confidence in the illusion of physical law and order which are reflected by his literature, on the one hand in the promiscuous reproduction of every sort of sensation and impression, and on the other hand in the suggestion of some outlying mechanical nexus as an all-sufficient principle of literary order. In this sense, however, the world made no appeal to the Greek dramatist. As a mechanical contrivance it left him cold—if such, indeed, it really be. At all events, it had not for him this particularly dreary illusion which has come to form its main significance for us. For this very reason he was able, with far less interest than we take in nature, to see and describe objects much more clearly than we are able to do. He perceived them more nearly as they are—at least in their relation to human life, with which he was himself preoccupied. For his illusion was essentially a moral one. Never would he have fallen into such fatal confusion as did Renan in alleging the unchastity of nature as a criterion of conduct. He was more likely, in the inverse

sense, to prescribe to nature from his own conscience. Indeed his religion, which Symonds calls at once a religion and a poetry, was an attempt to animate the physical universe with human passions, while his tragedy itself was an attempt to moralize that religion and through it nature as a whole. Whence its superiority; for the moral illusion is, after all, that which stands the best chance of not being altogether false, and even if false, is still the most ennobling and sustaining. And this is just the character of a great literature everywhere, a profound conviction of the unreality of those things which have been misnamed reality and the substitution for them of some high and abiding form of thought.

From our point of view, however, this moral is, it must be added, of a peculiar sort. The Greek, unlike the modern tragedian, made no particular effort to deduce his *action* from character. In this respect his drama is not moral, at least not ethical at all. The essential matter for him was not the manner in which personality is manifested in conduct. His first interest was in the action itself. The persons were of subordinate importance and derived their character, as well as their significance, from the action. Aristotle is explicit on this point.[1] What principally preoccupied the dramatist was the attempt to justify the quality of good or evil with respect to these actions as they tended to promote human happiness or the reverse. Were they productive of misery, he had to demonstrate their deviation from abstract right and justice, and contrariwise. And so it is that in vindication of the moral law the protagonist is always disposed of in accordance with the quality attached to his acts, for, says Aristotle, "Men are so and so by their characters, but happy or the reverse by their actions." It is for this reason that the Greek tragedies had such an exemplary force. Since the *action* is not the outcome of a unique character, but is only illustrated in the characters, its like might occur to one person as well as to another. Hence they touched the audience with an immediacy of pity and horror to which the romantic tragedy of character can

[1] Aristotle. *Poetics,* VI, 9–10.

make no pretension. Hamlet's and Othello's fate can befall only a Hamlet or an Othello; Oedipus' and Orestes' might befall any one. Of course we are bound to assume nowadays that nobody but Oedipus could have behaved like Oedipus. But not so the Greek—at all events that was not what he undertook to show—the exclusively Orestean nature of Orestes' deeds. His dramatic *motif* affirmed only that the deeds were evil and brought unhappiness, and were therefore to be abhorred on the ground not merely of expediency but of principle, while the character of Oedipus or Orestes himself, who shared the obloquy of the action, was revealed only in so far as it served to support this conclusion. By the moral idea of Greek tragedy, then, it is necessary to understand, not exactly an idea about human character and conduct in general, as Matthew Arnold uses the term in his discussions of poetry, but rather an idea about the quality of human actions, without particular reference to character, in conformity with some abstract principle of right and wrong.

To relieve this difference it is hardly necessary to do more than compare the impressions to which such plays as *Prometheus Bound, Oedipus Tyrannus,* and *Iphigenia at Aulis* probably did once and certainly do now give rise. While we, untroubled for the moral consistency of our world, shudder at a suggestion of material confusion physical, social, or industrial, the great and haunting terror for the Greek, the nameless apprehension that lurked upon his life, stealing into consciousness at moments of depression and pervading the whole fabric of his tragic literature, was the dread of moral disorder. The horror of *Prometheus,* for instance, which has become for us, as far as the drama retains any meaning at all, a vague horror of chaos, of a world deranged or a lapse of "law," was undoubtedly to Aeschylus exclusively moral. It was the horror of a profound and serious mind beginning to take account of its religious conceptions, its ideas of man and god, of guilt and responsibility, as contrasted with the horror of a present-day mind, accustomed to regard the stability of things as dependent upon the uniformity of nature rather than upon the integrity of the human spirit. To such a mind as was that of Aeschylus, the story of Prometheus was a

mystery, full of "labyrinths and meanders," unreasonable, monstrous, abhorrent, to be harmonized with the conscience at any cost. For with characteristic frankness the ancient dramatist recognized a set of "phenomena" whose significance we have now with characteristic casuistry juggled away. I mean that kind of case in which we have made a distinction as between moral and physical consequences. That there are occasions in this world when a man is obliged to settle for debts which he has neither incurred himself nor consented to, and to expiate such consequences as he has never foreseen, is undeniable. To our minds such cases, though they continue to form the basis of modern tragedy, are generally meaningless, because we deny the victims' responsibility. We are content with the air of baffling and inscrutable mystery which they diffuse about our tragedy,

"dont les sombres pensées
Sont d'un nuage épais toujours embarrassées,"

and which indeed constitutes its prevailing tone. But not so the Greek. With his moral prepossessions, with his tendency to see the moral everywhere, he was not willing to let such transactions pass as irrelevant or meaningless or only mechanically significant. They must, he felt, if the moral consistency of the world was to be preserved, possess a moral import. And in such case it was necessary to impute a moral accountability to their principals. Accordingly he never thought of denying Prometheus' and Oedipus' responsibility. "Ἡμαρτον, ὀυκ ἀρνήσομαι," says Prometheus himself. Guilty without intention, even contrary *to* intention, they may have been; but as human beings they were liable for the consequences of their activity. And while they were objects of pity on the one count, they were as surely objects of horror on the other.[1] Hence the curious duplicity of feeling

[1] It seems odd that none of the imitators, few of the commentators, of the Greek should apply this doctrine of pity and horror unflinchingly to the person of the protagonist. Such, however, appears to be the sense of Aristotle's illustrations. The case of Antigone is the most difficult, as it is in some ways the most exceptional. But we are so far removed from the temper of a Greek audience that, exclusively sympathetic though she is to us, it would still be rash to assert that their feeling for her was not

peculiar to classic tragedy, which instinctively strikes us, through our conventional admiration of antiquity, as gruesome and even shocking. And indeed to us, in whose minds the moral illusion is so greatly weakened, it seems no doubt a hard saying that man is answerable for what he does as well as for what he intends. We think to enjoy the privilege of action without assuming the responsibility; and when anything goes wrong, we have a convenient little way of shrugging our shoulders and leaving it with circumstance or providence. It is not so, however, that life would look to a consciousness thoroughly and consistently moral. Such a consciousness would find no satisfaction, either, in a physiological interpretation of what was and still is to some extent felt as the fatal obligation of blood, implicating the descendant in the vices and virtues of his ancestors and making the child responsible, like Iphigenia, for the parent; for to such a consciousness the human creature would appear, by the same illusion of moral order, accountable for what it is as for what it does. Nor is it wholly otiose in this connection to refer to the exemplary "statue of Mitys at Argos, which killed his murderer by falling upon him while he was watching a spectacle"[1]—a kind of incident which appears to Aristotle highly commendable for plots, "since such a thing seems not to happen at random," while to the modern critic it looks altogether accidental and quite unfit for tragedy, because where Aristotle was ready to divine a judgment and supply a moral connection, we can detect only a bare mechanical sequence without any retributive force whatever. And so it is for this reason, because we have shifted the center of gravity from man to nature, from the moral to the physical, that so much of modern tragedy is essentially fortuitous or unin-

unmixed with horror, that they did not feel her to be in some degree *ungeheuer,* uncanny, as they certainly did Orestes, Philoctetes, Electra, Ajax. Such a thorough-going application might assist in clearing up the perplexed and uncomfortable doctrine of the "purgation of the passions," inasmuch as pity for the victim may be supposed to temper the horror he aroused, and vice versa. Compare, for example, the quite unchastened approval accorded the modern "sympathetic" character, as instituted by Corneille.

[1] Aristotle. *Poetics,* IX.

telligible, or what comes to the same thing, is spiritually irrelevant, a tragedy

"Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,"

and that the classical tragedy has generally turned to nonsense in the hands of its adapters.

To Corneille, for instance, Oedipus is merely a blameless unfortunate. "[Il] me semble ne faire aucune faute," he says, "bien qu'il tue son pére, parce qu'il ne le connoit pas et qu'il ne fait que disputer le chemin en homme de coeur contre un inconnu qui l'attaque avec avantage."[1] Hence his desperate and grotesque exertions to put Oedipus obviously in the wrong, as he succeeds in doing finally in a manner undreamed of by Sophocles, by hatching up a love affair between Dirce and that universal lover, Theseus, and making of Oedipus a commonplace and silly intermeddler. In like manner he professes himself unable to comprehend Sophocles' motive in prolonging the action of *Ajax* so far beyond the death of the protagonist; though with the assistance of Aristotle's commentary it ought to be clear enough that the quality of the action, the idea of the drama, remains undefined until the disposition of Ajax's body is finally settled. Indeed, Aristotle's whole teaching with regard to the characters and the "purgation of the passions" appears to him so dark, devious, and dangerous that, once having made it respectful obeisance, as to a Gessler's hat, he prudently takes another road for the future. Nor can Racine, who in imitating Euripides comes perhaps the nearest to imitating antiquity, see much more sense in Iphigenia, but attempts, with the aid of the unhappy and officious Aricie, to substitute a shabby and conventional poetic justice for the profound naturalism of the original fable. "Quelle apparence que j'eusse souillé la scène par le meutre d'une personne aussi aimable et aussi vertueuse qu'il failloit représenter Iphigénie?"[2] Even Euripides, who is himself, on one side of his literary being, nothing more than an adapter of Greek tragedy, has so little appreciation of the morality of his predecessors that he tries to evade

[1] *Discours de la Tragedie.*
[2] Racine. *Iphigénie, préfacc*

it, whenever he can, by some puerile *ex machina* interference or some decadent falsification of motives. On the one hand the *dénouement* of his *Iphigenia in Aulis* is in flat contradiction with the *morale* of the remainder of the piece. The sacrifice is accomplished at Iphigenia's exit; the effect is produced already, and the effort to arrest it later is absurdity. On the other hand, his Orestes is no longer the pathetic and terrible figure of tradition and tragedy, Electra's brother, Clytemnestra's son. He is a contemptible, whining, besotted, epilectic parricide, at the mercy of a faithless and uxorious poltroon—a thoroughly Ibsenesque situation. He is already near the bottom; he has one step farther to fall into Racine's semicomic dupe of a vain and jealous coquette. While as for Seneca's, Dryden and Lee's, and Voltaire's parodies, what can be said of them, save only that such is the power of the tremendous old story that it is still capable of stirring obscurely the depths of our nature in spite of these marplots, whenever they will let the son of Laius himself upon the stage.[1] Even Boileau, the last great arbiter of things classical, is more remarkable, in dealing with these matters, for fluency, even he! than for insight.

> "Aussi pour nous charmer, la tragedie en pleurs
> D'Oedipe tout sanglant fit parler les douleurs,
> D'Oreste parricide exprima les alarmes,
> Et, pour nous divertir, nous arracha les larmes."[2]

It is not unlikely that in trying to make this point at all, I have overemphasized it. Such matters do not bear forcing. But I have done all I set out to do if I have made it clear that Greek tragedy did not pretend to represent actuality or any such physical or mechanical system as seems to us to be implied by actuality. On the contrary, it undertook to represent a series of sensations (the action) which should produce upon the spectators a deceptive effect of reality, but should, in fact, differ from it altogether in being informed with a moral idea, such idea con-

[1] Perhaps the very worst example of the insensibility of the neo-classicists to the Greek spirit is afforded by the letters of this same Voltaire prefixed to his *Oedipe*. Indeed, human fatuity can go no farther.

[2] Boileau. *L'Art Poétique*, chant. III.

stituting the writer's sense of the transaction. It is on this account that a Greek play seems to us so set and rigid. It is indeed in durance—in durance to a principle more or less abstract.

III

And yet, in spite of all his fumbling, something of this constraint, of this ideal purposefulness of classic tragedy Corneille felt, and not only felt but also succeeded in imitating and in fastening so unshakably upon the neo-classic drama that it is conceptually more nearly akin to the Greek than is that of any other nation, though neither he himself nor his immediate successors had fully measured the spirit that they were imitating. But while he often missed the idea of the Greek, he was very susceptible to its form. And it is undoubtedly true that the depth and seriousness of Greek tragedy, if not actually due to this cause, was at all events greatly intensified by its concision, which was, in turn, more or less accidental and a result of its peculiar manner of development. There was no room in Greek drama for a distracting play of circumstance. Its very limitations, as is not unusual in art, made its strength. The chorus, which anchored it so firmly to a given ground and held it so closely to a brief moment of time, prevented it from straying away in search of incident or from dissipating its substance in irrelevant sentiment. It could not become epic, on the one hand, a mere scenic chronicle of events, or lyric, on the other, an excited outburst of purely individual feeling. It was forced to remain a *genre tranché*. In its brief compass it could deal only with the moral issue or upshot of an action as denoted in character.

Something of this focalization, then, it is certain that Corneille saw and aimed at in adopting the "unities," which represented to him, as to the critics of his day, the structural merits of classicism. With regard to two of these unities, those of time and place, it is fitting that a word should be said. They have been so abused and decried in the course of a long and violent reaction that they have finally come to appear something monstrous and abhorrent, a damning evidence of literary servility and fatuity. That they

sometimes put Corneille and his followers to strange shifts can not be gainsaid. But the fault was not so much theirs as the dramatists', who were frequently unwilling to accept a stuff, or unable to cast it into a shape, conformable with their own theories.

It has been generally assumed that the unities of time and place were only devices for securing verisimilitude. And inasmuch as it is indifferently easy for their enemies to show that they contribute nothing to the probability of drama, but quite the contrary, and as their friends with singular blindness have insisted upon defending them on grounds so obviously false and untenable, the romanticists have leaped to the conclusion that they are altogether vain and inadmissible on any grounds. The fact is, however, that to Corneille, as to all the neo-classicists, whether they were conscious of it or not, the unities of time and place were, in actual practice, nothing more than a convention to secure dramatic relevancy and concentration. In this respect they were quite successful and were used by Shakespeare in *Othello* and by Aeschylus in *Agamemnon* and the *Eumenides,* to mention but a few instances, although it was Corneille who first reduced them to a regular theatrical *procédé* in taking them up into his drama and reinforcing them in his *Examens* and *Discours* with an ample apologetic criticism. With this assistance it is by no means difficult to follow the steps by which the convention was developed or to define the exact shape which it finally took to his imagination.

In the *Cid* he is as yet rather embarrassed. He acknowledges as much in the *Examen;* that he has managed matters rather clumsily and that he did not then see his way clear to the manner in which the unity of time might be made a practicable working stage-device. But it did not take him long to perceive that the reckoning of dramatic time is at best a very uncertain process; and consequently, when events are sown thickly together, without any reference to their duration, the impression produced is as likely to be that of a day as of any other period. In other words, he understood what dramatists have always understood and critics have often forgotten, that a play is meant to be acted

and seen, not pored over and anatomized, and that dramatic effect is largely an affair of hints, suggestions, and intimations, to which the audience pays small attention at the moment but which produce their result insensibly and in the mass. And therefore it is no very difficult matter to crowd the stage with incidents in a manner quite impossible to the reason, and yet to give the impression that they are confined to twenty-four hours in the naturalest way in the world. In short, it is an affair of plausibility, not of probability. And this is virtually Corneille's discovery—a discovery which made the unity of time possible as a condition of French tragedy.

"Il est malaisé qu'il se rencontre, dans l'histoire ny dans l'imagination des hommes, quantité de cès événemens illustres et dignes de la tragédie, dont les déliberations et leurs effets puissent arriver en un mesme lieu et en un mesme jour sans faire un peu de violence à l'ordre commun des choses, que je ne puis croire cette sorte de violence tout à fait condamnable, pourveu qu'elle n'aille pas jusqu'à l'impossible. Il est de beaux sujets où on ne la peut éviter, et un autheur scrupuleux se priveroit d'une belle occasion, et le public de beaucoup de satisfaction, s'il n'osoit s'enhardir à les mettre sur le théatre, de peur de se voir forcé à les faire aller plus vite que le vray-semblance ne le permet. Je luy donneroit, en ce cas, un conseil que peut-estre il trouveroit salutaire: c'est de ne marquer aucun temps, préfix dans son poëme, ny aucun lieu determiné où il pose ses acteurs. L'imagination de l'auditeur auroit plus de liberté de se laisser aller au courant de l'action si elle n'etoit point forcé par ces marques, et il pourroit ne s'appercevoir de cette précipitation, si elles ne l'en faisoient souvenir et n'y appliquoient son esprit malgrè luy."[1]

As for the unity of place he would treat that in general like the unity of time; he would, that is, allow himself, to begin with, as much latitude as he could plausibly neutralize in the final effect produced upon the audience. Between the treatment of time and place in drama, however, there is unfortunately one serious difference. In the case of the former there is nothing in the nature of a play that need remind the spectators of the duration of the action as such; whereas the *mise en scène,* the scenery and stage-setting, forces the latter consideration immediately upon the attention of the audience. The only way out of the difficulty would

[1] Corneille. *Discours de la Tragédie.*

seem to consist in making the setting as non-committal as possible and in particular in avoiding all changes of scenery, whether the action shifts its ground or not, just as all indications of time were previously avoided.

"Je tiens donc qu'il faut chercher cette unité exacte autant qu'il est possible; mais comme elle ne s'accommode pas avec toute sorte de sujets, j'accorderois tres-volontiers que ce qu'on feroit passer en une seule ville auroit l'unité de lieu. Ce n'est pas que je volusse que le théatre representast cette ville toute entiére (cela seroit un peu trop vaste), mais seulement deux ou trois lieux particuliers enfermez dans l'enclos de ses murailles. . . . Pour rectifier en quelque façon cette duplicité de lieu quand elle est inevitable, je voudrois qu'on fist deux choses: l'une que jamais on ne changeast dans le mesme acte, mais seulement de l'un a l'autre, comme il se fait dans les trois premiers de *Cinna;* l'autre, que ces deux lieux n'eussent point besoin de diverses decorations, et qu'aucun des deux ne fust jamais nommé, mais seulement le lieu general où tous les deux sont compris, comme Paris, Rome, Lyon, Constantinople, etc. Cela aideroit à tromper l'auditeur, qui, ne voyant rien qui luy marquast la diversité des lieux, ne s'en apperçevroit pas, à moins d'une reflexion malicieuse et critique, dont il y en a peu qui soient capable, la pluspart s'attachant avec chaleur à l'action qu'ils voyent representer."[1]

That is to say, if the stage represent no place in particular or represent a place with no particular character, there will be no remarkable incongruity in seeing any or all of the characters appear in such a scene, for it is obviously the kind of place in which any one might appear, though there is, to be sure, no particular reason that any one in particular should appear there. Such a place would naturally be a room,—an out-door scene would be too characteristic and peculiar for the purpose; and it would be a public room of some sort, or certain of the characters might seem out of place or suggest awkward doubts of their motives. So in the *Examen* of *Polyeucte.*

"L'autre scrupule regarde l'unité du lieu, qui est assez exacte, puisque tout s'y passe dans une salle ou antichambre commune aux apartements de Félix et sa fille. Il semble que la bien-séance y soit un peu forcée pour conserver cette unité au second acte, en ce que Pauline vient jusque dans cette antichambre pour trouver Sévére, dont elle devroit attendre la visite dans son cabinet. À quoy je répons qu'elle a eu deux raisons de

[1] Corneille. *Discours des Trois Unitez.*

venir au devant de luy: l'une pour faire plus d'honneur à un homme dont son pére redoutoit l'indignation, et qu'il luy avoit commandé d'adoucir en sa faveur; l'autre, pour rompre plus aisément la conversation avec luy, en se retirant dans ce cabinet, s'il ne vouloit pas la quitter à son priére et se délivrer par cette retraite d'un entretien dangereux pour elle, ce qu'elle n'eust pû faire si elle eust receu sa visite dans son apartement."

This is the second stage. The apologetic ingenuity is misplaced and weakens the case by continuing to rest it on the mistaken principle of versimilitude. He should have claimed at the very outset the immunity of convention—just as he goes on to do a little later when he comes to understand the real strength of his position and pushes his idea to a logical conclusion.

In order that a play may go on it is necessary that the characters meet. Now inasmuch as the characters are represented by the actors, these characters will appear to meet whenever the actors do. But the actors meet on the stage, and the stage is decorated to represent a scene. The difference between the stage and a scene, however, consists in this, that the one belongs to the theatrical reality, the other to the dramatic fiction; so that the scenery transforms the stage into an imaginary realm supposedly within the bounds of the play. Of course this is just the difficulty. But it may be obviated by letting the decoration represent a public room, as before, but one which all the characters are free to enter under any circumstances, avowedly on some more or less probable pretext, but in reality and by tacit agreement for the sake of carrying on the piece.

"Mais, comme les personnes qui ont des intérests opposez ne peuvent pas vray-semblablement expliquer leurs secrets en mesme place, et qu'ils sont quelquefois introduits dans le mesme acte, avec liaison de scénes qui emportent nécessairement cette unité, il faut trouver un moyen qui la rende compatible avec cette contradiction qu'y forme la vray-semblance rigoreuse. . . . Les jurisconsultes admettent des fictions de droit, et je voudrois, à leur example, introduire des fictions de théatre pour établir un lieu théatral qui ne seroit ny l'apartement de Cléopatre, ny celuy de Rodogune dans la piéce qui porte ce tître, ny celuy de Phocas, de Léontine, ou de Pulchérie dans Héraclius, mais une salle sur laquelle ouvrent ces divers apartemens, a qui j'attribuërois deux priviléges: l'un, que chacun de ceux qui y parleroient fust présumé y parler avec le mesme secret que s'il étoit dans sa chambre; l'autre, qu'au lieu que dans l'ordre

commun il est quelquefois de la bienséance que ceux qui occupent le théatre aillent trouver ceux qui sont dans leur cabinet pour parler à eux, ceux-cy pûssent les venir trouver sur le théatre sans choquer cette bienséance, afin de conserver l'unité de lieu et la liaison des scénes."[1]

It is easy enough to say that this is conventional and artificial; but that once said, the worst is over. To be sure, in such a practice time and place were abstract. But the statement means nothing more than that they belonged to the play, not to reality; that they pertained to the idea of the *genre,* not to the idea of nature—which is no more than to say that a play is a play. Or to put it in other words, the drama happened on the stage for as long as it was acting—surely no very grave fault in a stage play, since everybody knows that it never happened elsewhere or at any other time. Schlegel himself states the principle clearly enough in his *Dramatische Kunst und Litteratur,* though he misapplies it mischievously.

"Der Begriff der Taüschung hat in der Kunsttheorie grosse Irrungen angerichtet. Man hat oft darunter den unwillkürlich gewordenen Irrthum verstanden, als ob das Dargestellte wirklich sey. . . . Nein, die theatralische Taüschung wie jede poetische ist eine wache Traümerey, des man sich freywillig hingiebt. Um sie hervorzubringen, müssen Dichter und Schauspieler die Gemüther lebhaft hinreissen, die berechneten Wahrscheinlichkeiten helfen nicht im mindesten dazu."[2]

Exactly, the illusion of art—and the wonder is that any one should forget it—is wholly specious.

Such was the spirit of Corneille's teaching. And judiciously managed in accordance with this spirit, as Racine finally caught the trick of managing them, the unities of time and place are in themselves no more shocking than the gross conventions of the Elizabethan stage, for which we show ourselves so tender because they happen to be in our way—a placard doing duty for a scene or a lantern for the moon or other such like clumsy makeshifts as Shakespeare has himself ridiculed in the *Midsummer Night's Dream.* But to push the case at once to an extreme, is the fact

[1] Corneille. *Discours des Trois Unitez.*

[2] A. W. Schlegel. *Ueber dramatische Kunst und Litteratur;* Vorlesung, IX.

that the action of *Bérénice*, after the fashion of *Polyeucte*, passes willy-nilly in an ante-chamber contiguous to the apartments of Titus and Bérénice any more offensive to "verisimilitude" than the chasm between the third and fourth acts of the *Winter's Tale?* The fact is that Corneille and Racine may be right as well as Shakespeare. For as long as the main business of drama is accomplished, what difference does it make about such matters as these? Given the type of tragedy, it is of very small moment, after all, where *Bérénice* takes place, provided only the display of emotion for whose sake the piece exists be adequately carried off. In the whole range of neo-classic tragedy, it is safe to say, there is no more audacious violation of probability, no more purely artificial device, than the "double time," so called, which gives rapidity and intensity to *Othello*. If it is improbable that Titus and Bérénice should in reality open their hearts so freely as they do in the place assigned them, it is physically impossible, not to say absolutely inconceivable, that Desdemona should deceive her husband in the time at her disposal. If Othello could have told the hours, the murder would never have been committed. And what is so singular in the light of that romantic criticism which is continually reproaching Racine with Shakespeare, is the fact that the Shakespearean contrivance is in this case of exactly the same character as that by virtue of which Corneille begins by cramming the events of the *Cid* into a single day—what else is it than a unity of time?—only more daring. Nor does Aeschylus do otherwise in making the return of Agamemnon succeed immediately upon the fall of Troy; it is but one time and one scene. Beside such examples the procedure of Racine and Corneille, which we are invited to reprobate as unnatural, are marvels of verisimilitude and credibility. So true is it that Shakespeare himself, or any other playwright for that matter, had no slightest compunction in using a bold and literally impossible artifice when it suited his purpose. What cared he, or Aeschylus, in such a case for a timorous probability as long as he secured the dramatic intensity which the play demanded? Indeed, as Shakespeare proves—even to the satisfaction of the romanticists, I hope—such artifices are as likely to help as hin-

der; it all lies in their appropriateness. So the bare stage was an advantage to the romantic drama, whose strength consisted in reproducing, by a variety of incident, a sense of the bewildering *wirr-warr* of existence. And equally was the rigidity of the performance an advantage to Greek tragedy, whose strength consisted in the illustration of moral ideas. The only question, then, is not whether such a device is conventional and artificial, but is it in harmony with the spirit of the drama to which it is applied and does it assist the impression which that drama aims to produce? Only, if there is to be a convention, let it be as simple and elementary as possible. A monologue, for instance, is better than a "confidant" male or female, a direct explanatory address to the audience in the Greek manner than such an exposition as introduces Voltaire's *Oedipe* or Corneille's *Medée.*

> "J'aimerois mieux encore qu'il declinast son nom,
> Et dit: 'Je suis Oreste,' ou bien 'Agamemnon.'"

But while the neo-classicists were by no means blameless in these respects, yet the unities of time and place did, on the whole, agree so thoroughly with the general intent of their tragedy that it remains, with all its faults, the strongest structurally and the most effectual in design—that is, the most responsive to ideas—of any modern tragedy: so false is the whole romantic working-hypothesis that lawlessness is strength.

IV

And yet there were dangers which neither Corneille nor his successors escaped in attempting to reproduce the formal austerity of Greek tragedy. For if the unities of time and place have their conveniency, they have their liabilities, too; and it would have been well if their employers had always remembered that. while they were favorable to a strictly ideal design, they were altogether incompatible with breadth and variety of action or theatrical exuberance of any kind. Racine puts the matter very clearly in the preface to *Bérénice.*

"Mais ce qui m'en plût davantage, c'est que je le [le sujet] trouvai extrêmement simple." And he continues: "Il n'y a que le vraysemblance qui touche dans le tragedie, et quelle vraysemblance y a-t-il qu'il arrive en un jour une multitude de choses qui pourroient à peine arrivèr en plusieurs semaines? Il y en a qui pensent que cette simplicité est une marque de peu d'invention. Ils ne songent pas qu'au contraire toute l'invention consiste à faire quelque chose de rien, et que tout ce grand nombre d'incidents a toujours esté le refuge des poëtes qui ne sentoient dans leur genie ni assez d'abondance ni assez de force pour attacher durant cinq actes leurs spectateurs par *une action simple, soûtenuë de la violence des passions, de la beauté des sentimens, et de l'élegance de l'expression.*"

This is undoubtedly the formula of such a type of drama, not on account of "*vraysemblance*," wherewith we still love to delude ourselves, but on account of artistic consistency, which would preclude the use of a form for any other purpose than that for which it is fitted. And to this law, the law of congruous simplicity, Racine conforms pretty faithfully. Both Corneille and Voltaire, however, are grave offenders; and though Corneille's superiority as a dramatist is so great that he carries it off very much better than Voltaire, yet even his plays do not escape the sort of grotesqueness which arises from the application of a simple and severe method to a luxurious and diversified material. No one has ever felt the effect of the inconsistency more keenly, though he seems to have no suspicion of the cause of it. Hear him discoursing of the four last scenes of the first act of the *Cid;* it is one of the curiosities of literature.

"Le Comte et D. Diégue se querellent au sortir du palais: cela peut passer dans une ruë; mais après la soufflet reçeu, D. Diégue ne peut pas demeusrer dans cette ruë à faire ses plaintes, attendant que son fils survienne, qu'il ne soit tout aussitot environné de peuple et ne recoive l'offre de quelques amis. . . . En l'état où elles [les scenes] sont icy, on peut dire qu'il faut quelquefois aider au théatre, et suppléer favorablement ce qui ne s'y puet representer. . . . Ainsi, par une fiction de théatre, on peut s'imaginer que D. Diégue et le Comte, sortant du palais du Roy, avancent toûjours en se querellant et sont arrivez devant le maison de ce prémier, lors qu'il recoit le soufflet, qui l'oblige à y entrer pour y chercher du secours."[1]

[1] Corneille. *Examen du Cid.*

And all this in spite of the fact that the Count and Don Diégue move not at all and that the scenery never changes. It was this sort of thing which provoked Dryden to remark facetiously that in regular French drama "the street, the window, the houses, the closet, are made to walk about, and the persons to stand still."[1] But the cream of Corneille's commentary remains.

"Si cette fiction poétique ne vous satisfait point, laissons le [D. Diegue] dans la place publique, et disons que le concours du peuple autour de luy, après cette offense, et les offres que luy font les premiers amis qui s'rencontrent, sont des circonstances que le roman ne doit pas oublier, mais que, ces menuës actions ne servant de rien à la principale, il n'est pas besoin que le poëte s'en embarasse sur la scéne."[2]

Such is the desperate plight to which Corneille is reduced in his first masterpiece in order to give a kind of plausibility to its successive scenes. And though it must be remembered that the *Cid* is one of his freer plays and that his comments with respect to it are intended to be apologetic rather than exemplary, yet the case, while an extreme, is withal a fair one. In almost every instance Corneille's intrigue is too complicated for his form. His *Rodogune,* for instance, on which he prided himself particularly is on this account curious rather than impressive; and the "inventiveness" of the fifth act, which Voltaire pretended to admire and tried to imitate with even worse effect, is, under the circumstances, a blemish rather than a beauty. Indeed, he as much as confesses the fault himself, and even prides himself upon it with an ingenious and amusing vainglory quite his own. Of *Heraclius* he remarks justly enough,

" . . . le poëme est si embarrassé qu'il demande une marveilleuse attention. J'ay veu de fort bons esprits, et des personnes des plus qualifiées de la Cour, se plaindre de ce que sa représentation fatiguoit autant l'esprit qu'une étude sérieuse. Elle n'a pas laissé de plaire, mais je croy qu'il l'a fallu voir plus d'une fois pour en remporter une entiére intelligence."[3]

[1] Dryden. *Essay of Dramatic Poesy.*
[2] Corneille. *Examen du Cid.*
[3] Corneille. *Examen d'Heraclius.*

In short, Corneille is romantic by his plot and classic by his design. And it is to this fundamental incongruity between the form and the *fond* of his drama that his difficulties with the unities and his frequent apologies are due.

Nor is the tendency to stuff the action the only lee shore upon which neo-classicism drifted in attempting to lay its course by Aristotle and the Greek tragedians. It was all very well to attempt to bring the French drama out of the maelstrom of romanticism and to devote it to the service of ideas, provided the dramatist had any ideas to devote it to. But inasmuch as the unities rigidly limited the amount of incident, reducing the action almost to the dimensions of a situation as compared with that of the romantic drama, this very limitation was liable, in default of any serious or worthy purpose, to leave the writer, like Benvenuto Cellini, without sufficient materials for his casting, and oblige him to an unnatural prolongation of the action, particularly as the modern taste demanded a larger play than the ancient. In short, in assuming the restrictions which would assist in the expression of a genuine idea, the dramatist, in the absence of such an idea or in case of its inadequacy, ran the risk of falling into a sort of casuistical extenuation of what motives, emotions, and the like the situation afforded him, eking them out, as best he could, with aphorisms, *sententiae,* gnomic utterances, commonplaces, and what not, which lent an air of factitious moral reflection to his drama. To read Corneille in one mood it would seem as though the *Cid* must have attracted him, as it might have attracted Dryden, for the equivocalness of the situations; for there is nothing more common in literature than the acquirement of a taste for what was originally a defect and the gradual erection of a failing into a merit and a subject of imitation. Certainly in such speeches as Chiméne's,

> "Pour conserver ma gloire et finir mon ennuy,
> Le poursuivre, le prendre, et mourir après luy,"
> —*Le Cid, iii, 3.*

the dramatist is swimming triumphantly in some supersensible medium, equally remote from the idealized atmosphere of the

Greek and the romantic aether of Shakespeare—the kind of medium which characterizes such plays as the *Conquest of Granada* or *Aureng-Zebe.* So too in *Horace*—to set aside pieces like *Heraclius* in which the *equivoque* is inherent in the material—the permutations and combinations of relationship and of feeling between Camille, Sabine, Horace, and Curiace are figured out, not only with amazing thoroughness and ingenuity, but also with something of that forced and factitious wit which is nowadays associated with the name of Cowley. Nor, in fact, is Corneille, like Cowley, without a weakness for quibbles even in the most inappropriate places. While the elder Horace is bewailing what he supposes to be the cowardice of his surviving son fleeing before the Curiaces, he has still levity enough to excogitate his little witticism.

> "N'eust-il que d'un moment reculé sa defaite,
> Rome eust été du moins un peu plus tard sujette."
> —*Horace, iii, 6.*

But the fourth and fifth scenes of this same act, the third, are the triumph of that sort of emotional emulation or competition of sensibility which makes this literature look at times like a mere work of ingenuity—an attempt to see how many changes might be rung upon a given theme.[1]

Nor for all his tact is Racine by any means innocent of the same vice. The passage in which Aricie undertakes to explain her love for Hippolytus, though well known, is too good an example to remain unquoted.

> "J'aime, je l'avoûray, cet orgueil genereux
> Qui jamais n'a fleché sous le joug amoureux.
> Phedre en vain s'honoroit des soupirs de Thesée:
> Pour moy, je suis plus fière, et fuis la gloire aisée
> D'arracher un hommage à mille autres offert,
> Et d'entrer dans un coeur de toutes parts ouvert.

[1] For some suggestive remarks on the character and result of Corneille's dramatic casuistry, consult Brunetière's *Etudes critiques sur l'histore de la Littérature française,* vi, Corneille, sec. ii.

Mais de faire flechir un courage inflexible,
De porter la douleur dans une ame insensible,
D'enchaîner un captif de ses fers étonné,
Contre un joug qui luy plaist vainement mutiné:
C'est la ce que je veux, c'est la ce qui m'irrite,
Hercule à desarmer coûtoit moins qu'Hippolyte,
Et, vaincu plus souvent, et plûtost surmonté,
Preparoit moins de gloire aux yeux qui l'ont donté."
—*Phedre, ii, 1.*

This is not to exhibit human character or passion, to say nothing of human action; it is merely to force an opportunity, to exploit a situation. And though it is necessary to forgive much to an episode which serves as an occasion to Phedre's magnificent outburst of jealousy in the closing scene of the fourth act, the weakness of such a passage is unmistakable.

With Racine and Corneille the drama is indeed something more than this. With Voltaire, however, it is just about this and little more. It is very much with respect to action what a pun is with respect to language, a play upon incidents, a dramatic quibble—a fact which may account for the inveteracy with which he praises *Horace* in and out of season.

"Chere Obeide!"

exclaims the condemned lover in the *Scythes,*

"Prends ce fer, ne crains rien; que ton bras homicide
Frappe un coeur à toi seule en tout temps reservé;
On y verra tón nom; c'est la qu'il est gravé."
—*Les Scythes, v, 5.*

Even Goethe himself, when he attempts to be classical, does not escape. His *Iphigenia* is neither the expression of characters in action nor the notation of a transaction by means of characters. It contains neither actions nor passions. It is rather the protraction of a situation in "sentences"; and however noble and elevated those sentences, it has very much the same air of research which has perhaps done more than anything else to give this whole literature the name of "artificial."

And yet this subtilization of motives, particularly those of a paradoxical or antithetical sort, conveys a suggestive and in-

structive lesson; because the weakness would seem to be, not merely coincident with a certain school or period, but inevitable whenever the modern attempts to revive the spirit of antiquity, as though to us its singleness of eye, its grave and congruous simplicity were forever impossible—this curious dialectic and a peculiar sort of flatness or tepidity which is the natural counterpart of such an ingenuity and which is so familiar to every reader of French poetry. Without going outside the language compare, for example, this morsel of Corneille's *Suite du Menteur,* which Voltaire singles out for special praise, with a brief passage from a writer who, himself an admirer of the ancients, was yet quite untouched by the classical literary affectation, the artistry, of the renaissance—I mean Montaigne.

"Quand les ordres du Ciel nous ont fait l'un pour l'autre,
Lyce, c'est un accord bien tost fait que le nostre.
Sa main entre les coeurs, par un secret pouvoir,
Séme l'intelligence avant que de se voir;
Il prépare si bien l'amant et la maîtresse
Que leur ame au seul nom s'emeut et s'interesse:
On s'estime, on se cherche, on s'aime en un moment;
Tout ce qu'on s'entredit persuade aisement,
Et, sens s'inquiéter d'aucunes peurs frivoles,
Le foy semble courir au devant des paroles.
La langue en peu de mots en explique beaucoup;
Les yeux, plus éloquens, font tout voir tout d'un coup;
Et, de quoy qu'à l'envy tous les deux nous s'instruisent,
Le coeur en entend plus que tous les deux n'en disent."
—*La Suite du Menteur, iv, 1.*

It is on a somewhat similar subject, his friendship for de la Boëtie, that Montaigne speaks in the following terms:

"Si l'on me presse de dire pourquoy je l'aymois, je sens que cela ne se peut exprimer: il y a, ce semble, au delà de tout mon discours[1] et de ce que j'en puis dire, ne scay quelle force divine et fatale, mediatrice de cette union. Ce n'est pas une particuliere consideration, ny deux, ny trois, ny quatre, ny mille; c'est je ne scay quelle quinte essence de tout ce meslange, qui, ayant saisi toute ma volonté, l'amena se plonger et se perdre dans la sienne. Je dis perdre, a la verité, ne luy reservant rien qui luy fust propre ny qui fust sien."[2]

[1] *Discourse of reason.*
[2] Montaigne. *Essais,* i, 28 (1588).

It seems, indeed, as though there were but a single moment in the world's history when men could be unaffectedly simple without shallowness or banality; and that moment passed, they must needs be intricate or nothing.

"Les grandes choses," says Sainte-Beuve, "et qui sont simples a la fois, ont été dites de bonne heure: les anciens moralistes et poëtes ont dessiné et saisi la nature humaine dans ses principaux et larges traits; il semble qu'ils n'aient laissé aux modernes que la découverte des details et la grâce des raffinements."[1]

And so, if the inference is correct, it evidently indicates a source of weakness as dangerous to modern classicism as is the risk of distraction and confusion to romanticism.

[1] Sainte-Beuve. *La Rochefoucauld, Causeries du Lundi,* xi.